

First Flight

(Class X – NCERT English)

Chapter 9: Madam Rides the Bus – Vallikkannan

Detailed Summary (Expanded, Exam-Oriented)

The story "Madam Rides the Bus" by Vallikkannan is a sensitive portrayal of a young girl's first independent adventure and her innocent encounter with the realities of life and death. It beautifully captures childhood curiosity, determination, and the bittersweet process of growing up.

Valli (short for Valliammai) is an eight-year-old Tamil girl who lives in a small village. Her life is simple and confined to her home and immediate surroundings. The most exciting thing visible from her house is the street, where a bus passes regularly between her village and the nearest town.

Valli spends hours standing at the front doorway of her house, watching the street. The sight that fascinated her most is the bus that travels between her village and the town. She watches the bus come and go, observing the passengers getting on and off. This bus becomes the center of her dreams and desires.

Over many days and months, Valli collects information about the bus and its journey. She carefully listens to conversations between neighbors and regular passengers. She learns that the town is six miles from her village. The bus takes forty-five minutes to reach the town and makes the return journey in another forty-five minutes.

The fare is thirty paise one way. Valli calculates that she would need sixty paise for a round trip. This becomes her goal - to save sixty paise and ride the bus to town and back. She begins planning her adventure with the careful precision of an experienced traveler.

Saving sixty paise is not easy for a child who receives no regular pocket money. Valli resists every temptation to spend money. When other children buy peppermints, toys, or balloons, she firmly refuses, saving every small coin that comes her way. She suppresses all her desires, keeping focused on her single goal - the bus ride.

It takes Valli months of careful saving, but finally, she accumulates sixty paise. Now comes the next challenge - planning when to make the journey. She needs to go when her mother is taking her afternoon nap so that nobody knows about her adventure.

Valli plans meticulously. The bus schedule shows that the bus reaches her village at about one in the afternoon. If she takes that bus, she will reach town at one forty-five, and the same bus makes its return journey at two forty-five, which means she will be back home by three thirty. Her mother usually sleeps until three or four in the afternoon, so Valli calculates she can complete the entire

journey without anyone knowing she was gone.

One spring afternoon, when everything seems perfect, Valli decides to execute her plan. Her mother lies down for her afternoon nap, and soon Valli hears her gentle snoring. Carefully and quietly, Valli slips out of the house, her sixty paise clutched tightly in her hand.

She walks to the bus stop and waits. Her heart is pounding with excitement and nervousness. When the bus arrives, it seems even bigger and more impressive up close. The bus conductor, a jolly middle-aged man, asks her where she wants to go. "To the town," Valli says, trying to sound confident. "That will be thirty paise," he responds.

Valli climbs into the bus, which feels like climbing into a magical vehicle. She refuses to sit down, preferring to stand and look out the window to see everything. The conductor calls her "Madam" teasingly, which makes Valli feel grown-up and important.

As the bus moves, Valli's excitement knows no bounds. She sees the wide road, the trees, the fields - everything looks so new and exciting from the moving bus. The landscape unfolds before her like a moving picture. She sees a canal, palm trees, grasslands, and distant mountains.

An elderly woman gets on the bus and tries to make friendly conversation with Valli. She asks Valli if she is traveling alone and where her parents are. Valli, wanting to maintain her independence and dignity, responds curtly that she is perfectly fine on her own. The conductor and other passengers find this amusing, which annoys Valli, but she maintains her composure.

The elderly woman has large earrings with holes in her earlobes, and betel nut juice stains her mouth. Valli finds her appearance somewhat unpleasant and tries to avoid her. This shows Valli's childish sense of aesthetics and her desire to be treated as an adult, not as a child who needs protection.

During the journey, something funny happens. A young cow comes running very fast in the middle of the road, right in front of the bus. The bus has to slow down, and the cow runs ahead of the bus for some distance, as if racing with it. All the passengers laugh at this amusing sight, and Valli laughs the loudest, enjoying the unexpected entertainment.

Finally, the bus reaches the town. Valli is tempted to get down and explore, but she remembers her careful planning. She has exactly enough money for the return journey and no more. If she gets down, she might get lost, waste time, and miss the return bus. Moreover, she would need money to get back if she left the bus.

So Valli stays in her seat, watching as passengers get off and new passengers get on. The conductor asks her if she wants to get down and see the town, but she firmly refuses, saying she only wants to ride the bus. The conductor is amused by this strange passenger who travels just for the sake of traveling.

The bus begins its return journey. Valli is still excited, looking forward to seeing all the sights again from the opposite direction. She remains standing at the window, not wanting to miss anything.

But then something happens that changes everything. On the road, Valli sees a young cow lying dead. It is the same cow that had been running so playfully in front of the bus during her journey to town. Now it lies lifeless by the roadside, probably struck by some fast-moving vehicle.

The sight affects Valli deeply. The cow that had been so full of life and energy just a short while ago is now dead and motionless. This is Valli's first direct encounter with death, and it fills her with sadness. Her excitement and joy evaporate. She no longer wants to look out the window.

The conductor notices her changed mood and asks what happened. He tries to cheer her up, but Valli remains quiet and sad for the rest of the journey. The same sights that thrilled her on the way to town now fail to interest her. She has seen something that cannot be unseen, and learned something that cannot be unlearned.

The bus reaches her village, and Valli gets down. She walks home slowly, her mind still processing what she has seen. When she enters her house, her mother is just waking up from her nap. Her mother has no idea that Valli had been on an adventure.

Her mother is talking with an aunt, and they are discussing the bus to town. The aunt suggests they should take a bus ride to town sometime, and the mother agrees, saying it would be a nice outing. Valli, who has just returned from that very journey, makes a vague comment but does not reveal her secret adventure.

The story ends with Valli keeping her experience to herself. She has had her adventure, achieved her goal, but the experience has been more complex than she expected. She has learned not just about buses and travel, but about life and death, joy and sorrow, and the bittersweetness of growing up.

Central Themes

1. Childhood Curiosity and Determination

Valli's intense desire to ride the bus and her months of planning show remarkable determination for a child. She demonstrates focus, patience, and resourcefulness.

2. Independence and Self-Reliance

Valli wants to make this journey alone, without adult help. She plans everything herself and takes pride in her independence.

3. Loss of Innocence

The sight of the dead cow marks Valli's transition from pure childhood joy to awareness of life's harsh realities. She gains maturity but loses some innocence.

4. The Duality of Life

The story shows how joy and sorrow exist together. The same cow that brought laughter in life brings sadness in death.

5. Growing Up

The entire experience represents a rite of passage. Valli embarks on her journey as a child full of excitement but returns with a more mature, complex understanding of the world.

Character Analysis

1. Valli (Valliammai)

An eight-year-old girl who is curious, determined, resourceful, and brave. She demonstrates remarkable planning skills and independence. Initially full of childish excitement, she matures through her encounter with death. She is sensitive, observant, and proud.

2. The Bus Conductor

A jolly, friendly middle-aged man who finds Valli amusing. He treats her with kindness and humor, calling her Madam. He represents the adult world that can be both welcoming and patronizing to children.

3. The Elderly Woman

A fellow passenger who tries to befriend Valli. She represents typical adult concern for children. Valli finds her appearance unpleasant and her attentions unwanted, showing childish judgments and desire for independence.

4. Valli's Mother

Appears briefly but represents the secure home life that Valli takes for granted. She is unaware of her daughter's adventure, symbolizing how children have secret lives and experiences that parents never know about.

Important Vocabulary (With Meanings)

- **Fascinating** – extremely interesting
- **Slack** – time when there is less work or activity
- **Command** – an order given with authority
- **Slang** – very informal language
- **Tremendous** – extremely large or great
- **Kindle** – arouse or inspire an emotion
- **Viewing** – an instance of looking at something
- **Repulsive** – causing intense disgust
- **Thoroughfare** – a main road or public highway
- **Speck** – a tiny spot or particle
- **Depot** – a place for storage or parking of buses
- **Automatically** – without conscious thought
- **Devoured** – ate quickly and eagerly
- **Thoroughness** – complete and careful attention to detail

Exam-Ready Key Points

- Valli is an 8-year-old girl fascinated by the bus that travels to town
- She dreams of riding the bus and carefully plans her journey

- She saves 60 paise over many months by refusing all temptations
- Plans to go when her mother is napping so nobody knows
- Takes the afternoon bus to town - a 45-minute journey
- The conductor calls her Madam, which makes her feel grown-up
- During the journey, a cow runs in front of the bus - everyone laughs
- Valli reaches town but stays in the bus for the return journey
- On the way back, she sees the same cow lying dead on the road
- The sight of death deeply affects Valli - she becomes sad and quiet
- She returns home without her mother knowing about the adventure
- The story shows loss of innocence and the bittersweet reality of growing up
- Themes: childhood curiosity, independence, determination, and facing harsh realities